

January 30, 1970

Mrs. Leonard Meeter  
5039 Eskridge Terrace, N.W.  
Washington, D. C. 20016

Dear Mrs. Meeter:

Thank you for your letter of January 18. I have been receiving sporadic news of the hearings on FDC-78 with considerable interest, partly in an effort to frame a well-formed point of view about the issues therein. It seems preposterous that a well conceived effort at the fortification of foods be frustrated in this way. On the other hand, Mr. Goodrich is undoubtedly correct in pointing to the potentialities for abuse in the advertising of such products and in the exploitation of consumers through their often ill-conceived anxieties about good nutrition in relation to health. I was therefore gratified at the constructive recommendations of the panel of Dr. Mayer's conference on food, nutrition and health - both its encouragement of new foods and food supplements, and also the recommended regulations concerning the fair and accurate advertising of foods and disclosure of constituents. I should think that Dr. Mayer would be a very well qualified and very well motivated witness on your behalf.

I regret, however, that I cannot serve in the capacity of witness as you asked, both for reasons of personal convenience and, more importantly, because of the attack that might justifiably be made on my credentials as an expert in nutrition. I would certainly defend my competence to comment on the findings of others in this field, but having done essentially no research and little technical writing in it, I could very well be impugned for pretending to be a primary expert. There is, I believe, a long list of professors of nutrition who would strongly favor your side. I would be surprised if you had not already contacted Dr. Frederick Stare at Harvard, who could also readily put you in touch with many others. I could also refer you to Professor Roger J. Williams of the Clayton Foundation, University of Texas, Austin; Dr. Albert Szent-Gyorgyi at the Marine Biological Laboratory, Woods Hole, Massachusetts; and Dr. Aaron M. Altschul of the International Agricultural Development Service, USDA.

You asked me to comment in particular on the relationship between genetics and nutrition. As the literature on lactose utilization illustrates very well, there are still many unanswered questions in this field. Individual variability is already known to play a very important role in the response to cyclamates, and is probably also very important in the effects of MSG. I am confident that we have found only a few examples of this kind, only because we have not looked very hard. There are also considerable numbers of people who need information about the composition of food that cannot ordinarily be obtained very easily.

MEETER

for example, the presence of gluten, some notorious allergens like eggs, and for many people, the precise amount of salt or of carbohydrate in a given food. Some of these points should be inferred from a label, but cannot when the components of a given product are already a secondary food whose composition is not detailed.

On the other hand, I do not see very much sense in encouraging a great deal of self-prescription by people with a limited or distorted knowledge of nutrition. There are not enough physicians to do this kind of work, and they have usually not been properly trained for it anyhow, so perhaps we do need to encourage the growth of another category of professionally trained consultants who would be able to cope with advertising at an ethical level as compared to mass promotion. This approach still leaves many unsolved difficulties, for example, what to do about dietary supplements, like chromium, whose status is still controversial as far as human requirements are concerned. (That reminds me, by the way, that you might recruit Dr. Walter Merz, Chief, Vitamin and Mineral Nutrition Laboratory, Agricultural Research Service at the USDA at Beltsville, for expert testimony on trace metals like chromium. I could of course also mention Dr. H. A. Schroeder of the Dartmouth Medical School.)

Thank you for sending me Dr. Robinson's statement, which certainly does contain many illuminating criticisms. I am sure you will not be surprised if I return to some of these issues in comments through my column in the Post.

Sincerely yours,

Joshua Lederberg  
Professor of Genetics